

“I write my letters at school, so I’m ready right?” Low-income Latino children’s transition from preschool to kindergarten

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Introduction
The transition to kindergarten is a significant period in children’s education that initiates the development of skills that promote future academic success. Studies indicate that Latino children in the United States are disproportionately disadvantaged during this critical period of development, and are most likely to fall below the recommended levels of school readiness. Mothers are commonly the first teacher a child experiences and therefore influences the skills and abilities a child has before entering kindergarten. The effects of Latino parents’ feelings and beliefs are not limited to this brief transition to kindergarten; It continues and is depicted through children’s long-term academic and social success.

School Readiness: Although the definition of school readiness differs among scholars and practitioners, the general definition refers to the abilities and competencies a child should acquire before entering kindergarten. Research has shown that school readiness is influenced by mothers’ beliefs about parental involvement in education.

Parental Involvement: Parental involvement refers to the various ways parents choose to support their children’s educational development, both at home and at school.

Aim
The data for this study came from a larger ethnographic project that focused on the school readiness perspectives of low-income mothers. We used qualitative interviews with 17 low-income, Latina mothers of preschoolers living in a Chicago suburb to better understand how Latina mothers define school readiness. Our study also seeks to understand how Latina mothers are involved in their children’s kindergarten transition, as well as the support they utilize to facilitate this transition. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do low-income Latina Mothers define school readiness?
2. How are low-income Latina mothers involved in their children’s kindergarten transition?
3. What type of support do mothers utilize as they prepare children for kindergarten?

Method
Challenging a deficit perspective that often characterizes low-income families of color, this study used qualitative interviews and a resilience framework to better understand mothers’ definitions of school readiness and parental involvement activities during the transition to kindergarten. Our qualitative methods were informed by an interpretative approach that examined the daily-lived experiences and practices of parents. In-depth 60-90 minute interviews were conducted with open ended, topically oriented questions.



Mothers’ Definition of School Readiness

It’s important for Jax to enter kindergarten knowing how to write his first name properly ... but he writes it wrong.
-Amanda, 41

Children need to know the alphabet, Alma knows her alphabet.
-Jocelyn, 28

It’s important for them to socialize because in kindergarten there are a lot of different kids, more than in daycare. I imagine that if they know how to socialize, it is easier for them to make new friends and interact.
-Maribel, 27

Mothers’ Parental Involvement

He loves us to be reading together. I read to him...We read before going to bed.
-Kristina, 25

Parental involvement is asking questions to see if there’s a problem. If there is a problem, then figuring it out together so that the child doesn’t feel like they are alone.
-Marcela, 24

I take her to the library every Monday. We get them books to read at home ... it’s a treat for them when they behave.
-Laura, 38

Head Start as Support

They are helping her with colors and numbers. They are helping a lot!
-Natalia, 38

He comes home and tells me the words and says ‘the teachers taught me this in English.’ That’s important to me because he didn’t know English. He’s learning a new language there!
-Delia, 27

He knows his letters ... the things he knows are because of them, not me. More from them, than from me. I follow up, but they’ve helped him a lot.
-Alicia, 31

Discussion
The purpose of our research was to understand how low-income Latina mothers define school readiness in order to better understand their involvement in their children’s kindergarten transition. We also aimed to understand the types of support mothers used to assist in their children’s transition to kindergarten. After analyzing the responses from the participants in our study, we found that mothers primarily understand **school readiness** in terms of nominal knowledge and academic skills such as emergent literacy. Although academic skills were very dominant in mothers’ understanding of school readiness, socio-emotional skills were also a common theme. In regards to **parental involvement**, we found that mothers predominantly understand it as being home-based, focusing on emergent reading activities with their children. Findings from this study also revealed that mothers believed that attendance in Head Start was a significant factor in their child’s transition to kindergarten because the program exposed their children to English, and encouraged the development of nominal knowledge.

Implications: Ultimately, our findings revealed that low-income Latina mothers believe school readiness to encompass academic and socialization skills, especially in the home. As schools seek to increase parental involvement, different family values and cultures should be respected and included in how schools define and determine parental involvement.

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